

Seattle City Council Confirmation Questions & Answers

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- 1. What is your general philosophy for how to most effectively work with the City Council? How will you be responsive to Council requests, in particular regarding priorities that differ with those of the Executive branch?*

I look forward to building on the relationships established during my work for Council in developing an open, transparent and collaborative relationship with the City Council and its staff. The Mayor clearly stated his commitment to working collaboratively with Council and has empowered his staff to make this a reality. On issues where broad interests align, I will look for opportunities to involve Council staff as early as possible in developing and refining policy options and proposals. The City Budget Office (CBO) will be teaming with Mayor's Office of Policy and Innovation (OPI) on many issues, so our collaborative work with Council Staff will often include individuals from both offices. CBO and OPI's recent work with Central Staff on a potential Parks funding measure offers an example of this collaborative approach, as do ongoing collective efforts in developing policy options for a universal early-education program.

At the same time, I recognize that interests will not always align and that Council may make requests of CBO in support of the Council's own independent policy work. The Council's legislative function is an essential element of City governance and I see it as a fundamental duty of CBO to provide the data and information needed to support this function. In respecting the roles of the different branches of government, I would expect that Council would then rely on its own Central Staff and Legislative Assistants to use this information to develop specific policy options and legislative initiatives.

- 2. How will you ensure that Council members and Legislative staff receive timely information needed from your department for Council to make sound policy and budgetary decisions?*

During my time with Council I was dedicated to ensuring that Councilmembers were provided the information they needed to make educated and informed decisions. Given the basic structure of City government, much of that information resides with Executive staff, particularly CBO. While CBO staff must balance many demands, providing information to Councilmembers and their staff will be a priority under my leadership. As I noted above, Council's access to the information needed to support its role in setting policy is essential for the good governance of the City. In terms of tangible actions, I think we have opportunities to improve information flow during the budget process and intend to work with Central Staff to review our existing protocols. I am also encouraging my staff to reach out to Central Staff and Legislative Assistants to establish the trusting professional relationships that will help facilitate regular exchanges of information.

3. *One of the challenges you have inherited is how to improve performance as it relates to the provision of information to Council by some departments (e.g. SDOT and Parks), who are known for delayed/tardy responses to Council questions—particularly during budget; and b) providing inaccurate or incomplete information, necessitating a lot of checking/re-checking of information provided. Can you give us your thoughts on how you might work to address this?*

Let me say first that I agree that this is an area where we can do better. On the Executive side, I am working to improve relationships between CBO analysts and their counterparts within the departments. Unless information can flow freely through these channels, we will not be in a place to provide timely and accurate information to the Council. By working more closely with Central Staff in advance of the budget, I think we can also do more to anticipate questions from Council and reduce the “scramble” that occurs during the pressure of the budget process. A generally collaborative approach between Executive and Council staff could go a long way to address these issues. In terms of specific changes in process, less rigid structures for communication between Executive and Council staff would allow individuals to clarify requests rather than wasting effort addressing the wrong question, and fewer layers of review for proposed responses could expedite the overall process. I plan to pursue both.

4. *What is your organizational management approach? How will you review internal operations at CBO to determine if they warrant improvement? What is your leadership approach?*

I plan to develop a strong team of analysts that are capable of working with significant autonomy to add real value in support of key budgetary and policy decisions. I see an opportunity to reinvigorate CBO as an institution that -- more than just producing and monitoring the City Budget -- takes a significant role in pushing the City toward more effective and efficient operations. I also see the opportunity for CBO to partner with OPI in taking a more active role in policy development than it has had in recent years.

In my role with Council staff, I learned that building a team capable of such of work involves providing team members the tools they need to succeed, building an environment that encourages a free exchange of ideas, and trusting them to work independently -- while at the same time providing the guidance and coordination needed to keep them working together toward a common goal. That is the approach I intend to take at CBO. I have inherited a strong team and recently made several hires that will help strengthen the Office. My deputy, Tyler Running Deer, has already proven to be a great partner for me, as he has significant previous experience at CBO and King County’s budget office.

Over the next year as we move through the annual cycle of the budget process, I plan to closely track how CBO performs, looking both for where we show strength and where there are

opportunities for improvement. Based on that review, I will make further judgments about how the team might be improved through operational and/or structural changes. That said, we will not be stagnant this year and staff suggestions for a number of budget-related process improvements will be implemented over the coming months.

5. Give an example of your strategic planning abilities and describe an experience using strategic planning.

In 2007, as the original eight-year Parks Levy drew towards a close, a clear majority of City Councilmembers expressed interest in pursuing renewal of the Levy. However, then Mayor Greg Nickels did not share this view and made it clear that his administration would not develop a levy proposal. Norm Schwab and I stepped up to this challenge from a staff perspective and worked for several months to help lead a Council-appointed citizens' committee through the process of researching, developing and recommending a new six-year levy plan to the Council. In taking this project from general concept to fulfilled vision we had to develop and implement a strategic approach that anticipated any number of complications. For example, the limited cooperation of Parks Department staff left us at a potentially fatal shortfall of basic data, until we called on the assistance of retired staff who were able to share a wealth of knowledge. When basic logistical tasks started to prove overwhelming, we brought consultant assistance on board to help move the process forward. And when the Citizens' committee appeared on the brink of dividing rather than drawing to consensus, we helped broker a compromise that led the group to a clear recommendation. Council embraced the proposal, and the coalition that we had helped cement as part of the citizens' committee process held together through a successful election campaign. (And now we find ourselves on the brink of another major Parks funding proposal . . .)

6. What experience do you have balancing budget priorities in an environment where budget reductions are necessary?

During my seven years as Central Staff Director, the City faced budget reductions in at least four. Reductions were made as part of the annual budget process, but also implemented mid-year, when quickly shifting economic conditions forced immediate action. These were obviously challenging times, but clarity about priorities – in particular avoiding reductions in critical direct services – made it possible to frame the policy choices and offer specific options. I worked closely with the Council budget chairs as they helped lead the Council to identifying specific programmatic priorities and making allocations that were consistent with the reduced funding that was available. As difficult as these choices were, the pressures of budget cuts did also provide real opportunities to drive efficiencies and to find more cost-effective ways to provide services, both internal and external.

7. *The City of Seattle is currently implementing the Race and Social Justice Initiative to address racial and social inequities. In your position, how will you support and implement the Race and Social Justice Initiative? Can you provide some specific examples?*

At both a personal and professional level I am committed to the goals of the City's Race and Social Justice Initiative. I had a leadership role on the Legislative Department's RSJI team and brought multiple RSJI trainings to Central Staff. The Mayor has already demonstrated a commitment to RSJI, having joined his full cabinet in an RSJI training during his first week in office and I look forward to help building on this initial step. As a member of the Mayor's Executive Team, I will have the opportunity to highlight the importance of this work to his senior staff.

Furthermore, in performing its duty of helping frame policy choices for the Mayor, CBO can play a critical role in advancing these goals. Working with the departments, we can help quantify and/or explain how different budgetary and policy options may help relieve or exacerbate racial and social inequalities. While existing tools and processes, such as CBO's Budget Issue Papers, specifically require an examination of potential RSJ impacts, I am not convinced that that these tools are being implemented as effectively as possible. The analysis of potential RSJI impacts needs to be a sincere assessment, not a simple "checking of the box." To that end, I plan to review and likely enhance the training that is provided to CBO staff and analyze all the existing tools we currently employ. Furthermore, more collaboration with staff from the Office of Civil Rights may highlight additional opportunities to involve CBO staff in the broader RSJI effort.

8. *Describe an experience that you've had with a public relations challenge. What was the outcome?*

Shortly after I joined Central Staff, City Light found itself deeply embroiled in what was then called the "West Coast Energy Crisis." Through what was later demonstrated to be the intentional market manipulations of Enron and other energy traders, west coast prices for a megawatt hour of electricity increased from approximately \$50 to more than \$500. The impact on City Light's finances was swift and dramatic, and the utility was forced to borrow more than \$500 million to help purchase the energy needed to serve Seattle customers. To sustain this level of funding, City Light's rates were increased, in total, more than 50 percent over roughly an 18-month period.

While the overall crisis received a good deal of attention in the media, the City faced a significant challenge in explaining to City Light's customers why rate increases of this magnitude were necessary. While media relations was not a direct responsibility for me as the Central Staff analyst on City Light, I did team closely with others to provide critical background information to local reporters, and I worked with City Light to help provide public briefings to the Council's Energy Committee that were designed to explain how the situation had developed and what options existed to mitigate the impacts to City Light ratepayers. I also supported a

public effort designed to pressure federal regulators to step in and assert the power they had to restore well-functioning energy markets. Those efforts ultimately fell on deaf ears.

While the City succeeded in providing financial security to City Light and setting the foundation for policy shifts that have moved City Light away from a dependence on wholesale energy markets, there were significant political and professional prices to be paid in the wake of the crisis. Through this experience I learned the importance of keeping the public informed about major policy issues, but I also came to understand that information alone does not substitute for the accountability that the public reasonably demands of its public servants and elected officials.

9. Do you believe City departments should identify specific and measurable outcomes? What areas of the City budget do you believe best fit data-driven performance evaluation?

There is no question in my mind that specific and measurable outcomes are important for all City departments. A healthy organization is one that is always looking to improve its performance and effectiveness, and measurable outcomes can help provide a baseline from which to judge such performance. While that is easy to say in theory, the development of appropriate measures can often be a challenge. With respect to the City budget, the most important areas of performance to track are perhaps those that are directly visible to the public as basic municipal services. Public safety, as provided by SPD, SFD and the Municipal Court, is one such example, as are the basic utility services provided by SPU and City Light. In addition, the Mayor has specifically emphasized the need to establish measurable performance metrics for the range of services provided by HSD. I would emphasize these outward-focused types of services because I see the budget as a tool to providing increased transparency and accountability to the public. It is natural for the public to seek account for how public resources are spent and their most direct concerns are for the basic services upon which they rely. With clear, quantified expectations about the performance goals for each of these services, the budget can be a tool to allocate resources to achieve these goals in the most cost-effective manner possible.

That said, internal services departments, such as Finance and Administrative Services and the Department of Information Technology, could and do benefit from performance standards that guide their investment of limited resources. While measures for these types of departments are likely of less interest to the public, they can be used internally to drive performance. CBO and OPI can play an important role in setting expectations around such performance goals, and the Mayor has voiced his commitment to such an approach, but the key to success will be getting each department to buy into the approach and use it internally to frame management decisions.

10. How do you see policy choices being linked to, and reflected in, budget choices?

The annual budget is one of the City's most important policy documents. While many major policy issues do not require direct City funding (land use issues, for example), the budget does provide a very clear account of how the City matches its rhetoric about priorities with the actual allocation of available resources. Although the City's budgetary and policy decisions can have a critical impact on the growth of the local economy and the public resources available in the long run, within any given year the City's budget most closely resembles a "zero-sum" game in terms of trading-off one priority for another. For example, over the four-plus years of the recent "Great Recession," the City's budget reflected a prioritization of safety net programs and public safety over more discretionary services such as Parks and Libraries. These services are all valued, but the funding cuts demanded by revenue shortfalls brought their relative priority into sharp focus. Looking ahead, I see that the City will also soon face important decisions about the value it places on investing in the City's work force and establishing policies around fair and equitable compensation. Gender equity, minimum wage and sustainable retirement offerings are all issues that need to be addressed in some form, and all that could put notable strain on the City's budget resources. At the same, policies that drive for long-term efficiencies in the provision of City services could effectively expand the resources available to address new priorities, as could policy choices that help promote long-term growth in the local economy.

11. Do you support more standardization among City departments in areas such as capital budgeting, definition of "overhead," allocation of overhead costs, etc.? Will you push for more standardization?

Over a period of many years, the City has moved to an ever-more decentralized system of accounting and budgeting. While the independence and autonomy of individual departments may be attractive in terms of promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, it is a distinct disadvantage in terms of financial oversight and accountability. For example, the systems we have in place now make it difficult, if not impossible, to centrally track month-to-month spending by individual departments. This limitation is compounded by the fact that each department uses our existing accounting systems in different ways, coding revenues and expenditures in an inconsistent manner. Furthermore, as noted in the question, the City has adopted inconsistent approaches to how it appropriates and tracks the capital funding provided to different departments.

I do firmly believe that a more standardized, consistent system is needed to help better manage the City's finances, and I am committed to working toward such standardization. I cannot promise that we will make major steps during the first year of this new administration as we must first learn more about the specific limitations of current processes, but I can say that we are moving forward with the critical accounting infrastructure that will be needed to support any standardized system. Under the leadership of the City's Finance Director, Glen Lee, the Finance and Administrative Services Department is continuing its "FINMAP" project. This project involves a re-implementation of our Citywide accounting system and provides a key opportunity to redefine new standardized approaches to financial tracking and management.